New wounds, old scars

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New wounds, old scars

by wld_u_kndly

Summary

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"Have you got any vaccines done, kid?"

-and stops it right before the hit connects, the Psycho Power pitifully sizzling out into nothingness. Ed turns around, training forgotten, because what in the actual fu-

Notes

The only time I felt that I could write well was during the night when I was close to falling asleep, so if this fic doesn't end up making sense in some places uhhhhh ummm sorry? :DD

See the end of the work for more notes

The first time it happens, it comes out of nowhere.

Ed and Balrog are spending their time in a dingy training room near the edge of the city for the evening. The place is not the cleanest nor is it the most popular, but it has basic equipment and strong enough opponents. In addition, it's one of the only places that lets them in without a fuss. Balrog's less than favorable reputation wasn't very *persuasive* in letting establishments accept him and his protégé without a few concerns, as it turns out. Concerns which they were in no mood to entertain that day.

The room is currently uninhabited, save for the two of them. Ed hits the punching bag with all of the might he can muster, making it sway back and forth. If any other boxer saw this display, they would scoff: there was no finesse in those punches, no polish. Just pure, unfiltered power. But that was good enough. At the end of the day, in a real fight, the most important thing is to make the opponent go down and *stay* down. No time to make sure you're doing it the 'correct' way.

Before the punching bag has a chance to return to its starting position, he quickly sidesteps and attacks it again from a different angle, hitting it with a few jabs. So far so good, as practices go. The boy listens for his mentor's commentary, whether it be positive or negative, hopefully positive, yet he hears nothing. He listens for some more, getting a few good hits in, but the only sounds he registers are the ones he himself is making.

Actually, now that he thinks about it -- he changes the angle again and sends out an uppercut -- Ed hasn't heard Balrog say *anything* since the start of practice. Usually there'd be at least a grunt or a quiet appraisal, but no. Nothing.

Huh. Weird.

When he spares a glance towards the man, he notices that while the boxer is looking at him, he's not *watching* him, not really. His eyes don't follow his hands or feet, when they're supposed to scout for any signs of hesitation or weakness. That doesn't change even when Ed empowers one of his punches with Psycho Power, not enough to deal permanent damage, but enough to send the punching bag further back than it should. Balrog's eyes remain unfocused.

He does it a few more times, pulls off any and every fancier-than-usual move he can think of and checks the boxer's reaction, only to be met with a blank wall everytime. *Dammit.* Nothing seems to work and, to be honest, he's starting to get annoyed, insulted even. Is he *really* that boring that Balrog can't even *pretend* to seem interested in what he's doing?

But the more glimpses he catches of the man, Ed starts to realize something. It's not that Balrog is intentionally ignoring him, or that the guy's brain has exploded and left him dead while standing (anything can happen these days), but it's more like he's... thinking about something...

Ah. *That's* what it is.

Balrog, *the* Balrog, actually looks *lost in thought.*

Weird. Definitely weird. He never considered Balrog as the thoughtful type.

With one question solved immediately in its place rises another: *what* has Balrog so stumped? Now this one Ed is less interested in answering. Knowing the guy, and he likes to think he knows his mentor pretty well, it's probably something related to money, maybe alcohol if it's that kind of week. There's not much else that is of great importance to him besides that. Whatever it may be, it would be nothing new, just same old Balrog stuff, and the boy would rather spend his energy somewhere else, say, practicing his combat skills, thank you very much.

So he leaves Balrog alone (suppressing the idea of throwing at least one punch towards him in the process, because *seriously*, can he at least *try* to focus?) and returns his attention to the task at hand. A jab here, a punch there, an uppercut, more jabs, some footwork -- all of it is familiar to Ed, monotonously so. The adrenaline rush and unpredictability that comes from clashing with another person is not present, *that* would at least bring some enjoyment in these repetitive moves.

But there's no one to spar with this evening, no one *alert* enough that is, so he's stuck with the punching bag for the time being. Maybe he should go back to the punch-Balrog-in-the-face idea after all, that would definitely wake the guy up...

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"That was a pathetic excuse of a punch just now."

"Screw that. *What did you just say?*"

"You heard me the first time."

"Yeah, no shit I did! That doesn't explain *why* you just said that outta nowhere!"

Balrog crosses his arms and huffs. "Just curious, s'all."

This has to be a dream. It's gotta be. Balrog? Wondering if he got *vaccinated*? *What the fuck is happening??*

Before Ed can even begin to ask half of the questions he now has (what started this, why *now* of all times and why is *Balrog* of all people concerned about this to the point of getting *distracted*), the boxer suddenly moves from his observing spot and towards the boxing ring in the middle of the room. He climbs up and over the ropes, the actions like second nature to him, and turns to the blond. "You played with that thing for long enough. C'mon, show me what you can *really* do."

A smile slowly spreads across Ed's face. Pushing his racing thoughts to the wayside, he quickly makes way to follow Balrog. Anticipation runs through his veins, leaving a nice, tingling sensation.

The questions can wait. Right now, there's some fighting to be done.

The questions happen to wait for longer than originally planned.

They sit at a remote corner of a burger place, away from most of the customers, their orders sitting between them on the table. Well, Balrog's order, at least: Ed wasted no time finishing his the second he sat down, devouring it like a man starving, and now sipping what's left of his drink. It took the boy a lot of persuasion (aka pestering) to get his mentor to bring them here, so no way in *hell* was he going to risk him changing his mind before he got to enjoy the food. Though he's not sure if all that speediness was necessary, as Balrog is still stuck trying to remove his boxing gloves. What can he say, he gets hungry after training.

And train they did. He threw himself at Balrog for hours today without stop, the only periods of rest being those few precious minutes after getting his ass kicked by the boxer, even with him holding back as to not seriously hurt him. Ed could understand now why he was disgraced by the boxing community at large -- that man liked to play *dirty*. Not that it bothered him, far from it. He himself had some tricks up his sleeve after all.

This hands-on kind of approach to training has been a favorite of Balrog's as of late. Probably because he finally started to hold his own against the ever so powerful fighter. The last time he seriously trained with equipment was a few weeks, maybe a month ago..? Yeah yeah, a month, in that one shabby place at the edge of the city. There was a patched up punching bag, a ring and-

Oh.

Oh yeah.

That also happened there, didn't it? He was supposed to go back to that.

Ed stops slurping the soda in his hand -- the cup is almost empty anyway -- and lightly clears his throat.

No better time than now, he supposes.

"So..." he starts, getting Balrog's attention who was just about to bite his burger, hands finally free of their constraints. "What was with that random question a few weeks back? In that dingy place?"

Balrog doesn't respond, but Ed can see the cogs turning in his head. After a few moments his eyes slightly widen with understanding. "Ah. Just wondering if you got all that vaccine stuff down and whatnot. Most other people have."

He can't help it, he bursts out laughing. It sounds even more ridiculous the second time he hears it, the words said in the man's distinct gruff voice. The blond half expects Balrog to laugh as well, revealing everything to be some weird attempt at comedy. But no, he looks as stern and scary as he always does. Somehow, that's worse.

His laughter quickly dies down after that. "So. You're serious."

A confirmative huff. "You never answered the question."

He didn't, did he? Ed lets out a resigned sigh, leaning further into his seat. "Then, since you want to know *oh so* badly: no, I have not gotten any freaking *shots* done or whatever." As far as he knows, at least.

"You sure?"

"Mhm." It doesn't sound very assured.

"Ed, are you really-"

"*Yes!* No! Wh- look, *I don't know!*" He throws his hands into the air, exasperated. "I didn't exactly keep track of what they were injecting me with day in and day out!"

That makes Balrog pause for a moment. This was a topic they both hadn't bothered to breach, whether from disinterest or unwillingness. Those days were long gone, anyway, no point in bringing them up.

"That wasn't what I was implying." Ed will graciously ignore the fact that he definitely did. "But seriously, I gotta know for sure. Can't have you get sick on me from a random virus or something."

"During all of the time we have spent together, when have I ever gotten even a little sniffle? Never, that's when."

Balrog sighs and puts down his burger on the table. "But we can't be sure it's gonna *stay* that way."

"Why does it matter, anyway? It hasn't been a problem before."

"Because if you get sick, it will not only affect you, but also me and my future profits," he says, sounding out the words with unusual carefulness, as if he is reluctant to let the true meaning behind them be known.

Not that it stops Ed from figuring out the gist of it -- he is quite perceptive after all. He feels a certain warmth spread through his chest at the untold confession of his importance to this gig -- *their* gig, really -- and he can't fully fight off the smile forming on his face. It's enough to overpower the annoyance he feels at the implication that a little sickness would put him down, just barely.

"When did you start thinking ahead..?" he mumbles, words muffled even more by the hand he now currently rests his head on in an attempt to quell the giddy satisfaction. Seriously, it

shouldn't make him *that* happy.

Balrog grins at that, having somehow heard his response in the busy burger place, and he's about to respond, but-

"*Oof!*"

"Hey, watch where you're going, bastard-"

He turns towards the unlucky person who had bumped into him, already halfway through a hastily thought of apology. Not that it matters when you're dealing with someone so ill-tempered as Balrog. The boxer's berating words are as vivid and threatening as they always are, though they lose some of their charm when directed at someone who looks ready to burst into tears.

Ed quickly loses interest in the verbal beatdown that is happening in front of him. Instead, seizing the moment, he emits some Psycho Power from his hand potent enough to latch onto Balrog's abandoned burger and brings it to himself. He thinks about the pros and cons of what he's about to do for the entirety of two seconds before biting into it. If Balrog really wanted it, he would've eaten it already.

Three bites in, the said man finally turns back around, having put the fear of ever coming back to this establishment in the poor guy, to the sight of part of his food missing and Ed chewing on a suspiciously familiar burger.

"...this is the last time I'm bringing you here."

"Hehe."

He thought that was the end of it. Truly, he should've known better.

Before Ed has the chance to fully wake up from his surprisingly peaceful sleep (as peaceful as it can be with an evil dictator dead set on overtaking his psyche plaguing his dreams every night, anyway), he feels a soft object hit his chest. With bleary eyes he tries to place a name to it, though it's hard to figure out anything besides 'some sort of white blob'. What he *can* recognize is the bulky silhouette not far away from him, an arm slightly raised as if it had tossed something recently.

"Get up. We gotta go."

Groaning, Ed slowly gets up to a sitting position, using one of his hands to support himself while the other rubs his eyelids in an attempt to fully regain consciousness. He catches a glimpse of the brightness outside, or the lack of it -- seems to be still early in the day. What has Balrog so worked up this morning?

Though his mind is sluggish, he manages to churn out a response. "Huh? What for..?"

"We have some business to take care of, hurry it up."

Well, that's the first time he's hearing about this. They never spoke about any 'business' that needs to be sorted today, let alone one with such an early deadline. But plans change, so Ed won't complain, even if it is a bit strange.

Upon closer inspection, now that most of the bleariness from his vision is gone, the white blob crumpled near his stomach looks closer to a sleeveless hoodie. One of his favorites, in fact, for reasons he is too embarrassed to admit even in the privacy of his mind. He raises it up, a question on the tip of his tongue, before realizing that it's probably a change of clothes for him. It makes sense: he has worn his current outfit for a few days now, today would be a reasonable time for a change up.

When Ed finishes putting on his new outfit, Balrog is already near the exit. Seeing that, the boy hurries out after him, falling a few steps behind. They fall into their usual rhythm: Balrog leading the way and Ed dutifully following him, looking around for any potential threats in the meantime. It's nice, in a way. This routine.

What's not nice is the silence. Balrog seems purely focused on reaching their destination, which wouldn't be a problem if it weren't for the fact that Ed had no idea what that destination even *is*. As cocky as he may be, he's not reckless enough to charge into possible danger blind.

That's why it doesn't take long for him to start asking questions. "So, you plan on telling me where we are going? Or are we just gonna pretend that I'm supposed to know?"

Balrog turns his head to side-eye the boy before turning back. "A hospital." He can probably feel Ed's confusion at that short statement because he continues, "Found this place, seems reliable enough. Cheap, too, at least compared to the rest of 'em."

"Why would we need a hospital visit?" They're both not hurt, as far as Ed is aware, internally or outwardly, and they don't even go there for treatment in the first place.

"Because there's no other place that would give you a vaccine, obviously."

"*What?!*"

Ed stops in his tracks, staring at Balrog's back in confusion. Sensing that the second pair of footsteps have gone quiet, the boxer turns around. He opens his mouth to respond (a very annoyed '*what is it now?'*, most likely), but thinks better of it.

Instead, a groan-but-technically-still-a-sigh comes out. "C'mon, Ed, don't be difficult."

"No! Not until you explain why we're doing this- this-!"

"I think I told you my reasons before, no? Or were you not listening?" Balrog interrupts him.

Seriously? That again? Does he *actually* think that a cold or whatever other illness he could hypothetically catch would put him out of commission? He's not that fragile!

Ed makes a slew of random noises, swinging his hands around as if to try and catch the words he wants to say, and failing miserably. Seeing the boy not make a move to speak actual

sentences, Balrog starts walking again and takes a turn to the right along the pathway. Not one to be left behind, Ed quickly catches up to him, only slowing down when he reaches the guy's left side.

"I just don't understand," -he presses into Balrog to avoid a pedestrian- "why you are so obsessed with this. You never seemed to care about trivial shit like this until, like, a month ago."

"That's because I started *thinking* about it a month ago. Thought it would be for the best to get you into peak health condition for future jobs -- I don't know why you're so against it," Balrog says.

"Okay, first of all, I'm already at peak health." Not a lie, but also not the truth. Ed knows that Balrog can see how he moves more reserved some days, as if his usually unrelenting energy has been sapped away overnight. "Second of all-"

"We're here."

They stop abruptly and look towards their destination. It's, well... Ed doesn't know what he was expecting, really. It's a hospital, a small one, sure, but still a hospital. It could use some renovations, but so could every other building in this district. Dare he say, it looks kinda cozy, squashed in-between other buildings.

Balrog starts moving first, like always, and Ed follows right behind him, like always. The boy should probably make a bigger fuss about this because he *really* thinks this is stupid and they should be anywhere else, but... Balrog's right. There's no reason for him to be so against it. He won't lose anything by doing this and it only serves to make his health better, allegedly.

It doesn't lessen the strange feeling of dread in his stomach.

They walk through the front door and Ed takes the time to look around. There's a few people already there, mainly older residents and a singular tearful kid clinging onto his mother, some plants that look decently kept and otherwise sparse decorations. It's okay as far as hospital interiors go, not that he has much to go off of in the first place. Balrog never took him to see anyone whenever he got hurt, preferring to patch them both up himself. And as for the only other hospital-adjacent establishment he knows, well... this one's definitely brighter.

He has half the mind to sit on one of the frankly uncomfortable looking chairs, but before he can he sees Balrog chatting it up with the receptionist already. He breathes in, exhales, breathes in again and steps next to the boxer. Guess they really are doing this, huh.

Ed ignores the ongoing conversation in favor of people-watching, so he gets surprised when he sees Balrog move out of the corner of his eye, telling him the room number. He hums in acknowledgement and moves to follow, sticking by close as to not accidentally get lost.

They move through a corridor, passing by a few doctors, though Ed doesn't stare at them for too long. White blurs is all he sees, and maybe it's for the best. They stop near a door labeled '123', the numbers written on a simple rectangular plate, and take a seat not far from it. There's no one there besides them and he doesn't hear anything coming from the office itself.

He doesn't understand why they don't just barge in and get it over with, but Balrog seems willing to wait for their turn the normal, we're-people-with-manners kind of way, so Ed decides to wait too.

With nothing better to do, besides anxiously waiting for the inevitable, he turns towards the only other person here. "How'd you find this place, anyway? Didn't think a hospital would allow someone like me to get an appointment."

"What do you mean?" the boxer says.

"Y'know," -he waves his hand dismissively- "no previous medical history, no documents, identification..." He doesn't even know if he originally *had* any, though he doesn't doubt it -- those bastard were meticulous. Even if he did, they're either just a scattered pile of ashes now or rotting away in some database.

Balrog huffs and flashes a smile. "I just had a simple talk with them. They were very understanding of our situation."

Hearing that, Ed fails to stop the amused chuckle from escaping past his lips. He hopes he didn't threaten the doctors *too* much -- Balrog can be scary when he needs to be (and when he doesn't, truth be told) and they're just trying to do their jobs.

He's about to continue the conversation when the door opens and a figure emerges from the room. The pure white robe he's wearing blends in with the room behind him and makes his concerned, panicky face stand out more. Ed focuses on that.

"You can come in, mister... uh..." the doctor trails off, glancing at Balrog and Ed interchangeably, but not lingering on either of them. He's anxious, scared maybe, and it makes the boy relax a bit. He doesn't have power over him, not overtly. For now.

Instead of finishing his sentence, the guy just silently ushers them in, moving out of the way in the process. Ed steps through the doorway first with the confidence he half-feels and immediately gets hit by the sterile smell that is somewhat familiar, if a bit cleaner. He tries to observe his surroundings, but he hears the door close behind him and footsteps approach him.

"If you could sit over there, please." The doctor directs him towards the examination table near the corner while going somewhere else himself. The boy does what he is told, gripping the table viciously as to not fiddle with his fingers. He would rather not reveal that he feels just as anxious as the guy who is gathering the tools needed nearby with his back turned. Though he can't quite stop his leg from bouncing.

Ed can't take his eyes off him, following his every movement closely, even when the doctor turns around and catches him staring. He walks up to him slowly, as if trying not to startle a scared stray cat -- maybe he isn't hiding his nervousness as well as he'd like to believe -- and arranges his selected tools on a countertop. His hands are surprisingly steady, every probable imperfection ironed out by years of practice, no doubt. It should make Ed calm down, less chances of a mishap happening, but it doesn't.

He picks up a piece of cotton and wets it with disinfectant before turning towards Ed, the hand holding the piece reaching for his left arm area, yet not touching. The doctor widens his eyes when he notices the tattooed bar code present there before looking into his eyes as if asking for permission. The boy would appreciate the carefulness if he weren't so eager on finishing this as quickly as possible.

He makes it clear as much. "Well, are you just going to stand there? We don't have all day." He hopes the nerves in his voice get mistaken for annoyance at the sluggishness rather than for what it truly is.

That spurs the doctor into action, muttering hurriedly some sort of answer as he gently, but firmly cleans the upper arm area, right on and around the tattoo. It's a good thing he's wearing something without sleeves today, it gives easy access with no extra labour. What would be the chances of Balrog picking out this hoodie specifically for this occasion? Ed's too focused on the doctor's every move to answer that.

After the arm is thoroughly prepped, the doctor turns and picks up a vial of presumably the vaccine and a syringe from the countertop. Ed's stomach churns at the sight of it. He, either intentionally or not -- he doesn't know -- failed to spot it when the doctor was first coming back from his supply run, but now he can't take his eyes away from it. He's hyper aware of everything about it: the way the needle sticks into the top of the vial, how the substance inside said vial fills up the syringe, how a single drop of it droops down the needle after the doctor flicks it lightly with his finger and most of all -- what's going to happen next.

Ed tenses even more when the doctor finally positions the syringe for the injection, though he, for some reason, doesn't go through with it. The hand stills just before piercing the skin, like it's not sure if it should go for it. This stalling leaves the boy conflicted: he doesn't know whether to ask for the guy to hurry it up or postpone it even more.

"It usually becomes easier when you aren't looking," the doctor speaks up, startling Ed from the quietness, though he still keeps his eyes trained on the needle near his skin. At the lack of a response, the guy shrinks up a bit into himself, uncomfortable.

The blond knows that what the doctor is saying is not a lie, has the experience to prove it, but he can't make himself listen to the advice. He *has* to keep looking, *has* to analize every little detail, make sure that what's entering his body won't hurt him, not again.

Ed bites his lip, hard enough to feel the teeth put indents into the skin. God, it's been how long already? He doesn't even remember, and yet those days still haunt him. At night, yes, but also daytime it seems. It's like wherever he goes, the pain from days long past follows, having made itself home in this body of his, showing up at the most inconvenient of times. It annoys him. *Angers* him. Strong enough to be a spare body for a megalomaniac dictator, yet afraid of a needle.

Everything around him feels like too much: the overly bright lights, the sterile smell, the examination table beneath him. It makes Ed want to lash out, to break every single vial in this goddamn room and destroy every single piece of equipment in an act of what? Rebellion? Petulance? Self-preservation? He can't be bothered to care, he just wants to *leave*. He wants to get away from the danger that his brain insists is near. He wants-

"Everything okay, kid?" A sudden sound on his right, a *familiar* sound, makes Ed reemerge from his mess of a mind and finally, *finally* move his gaze away from the needle and towards the source of the disruption. There, a meter or two away from the examination table, stands Balrog, grimace on his face and all. When they make eye contact, his face scrunches up even more, a silent question.

Right. That's right.

Balrog's here, too.

Balrog... Balrog would never let anyone hurt him.

He might be aggressive and prone to violence, sure, but that never extended to Ed. He would never intentionally place him in a situation where some rando could inject him with god-knows-what -- isn't this whole ordeal happening because of Balrog's interest in his health, sudden as it may be? He would gain nothing out of endangering him.

And if the doctor *were* to pull anything (which the boy is doubtful of, since the guy acts like any wrong move will be his doom), he wouldn't get far before the boxer taught him a lesson, if Ed didn't get to him first. He's sure of it.

With that mindset running through his head like a mantra (*you're safe, Balrog's here, the doctor won't hurt you, this injection won't harm you*) Ed manages to quell the panic inside him, enough to relax his muscles a bit and stop gripping the examination table with so much force. He blinks away the wetness from his eyes -- no, he's *not* crying, not today, not ever -- and sends out a weak nod towards Balrog, assuring him that he's fine now. The man doesn't seem to fall for his half-lie, but also doesn't make a move to do or say anything else.

Ed turns his gaze back onto the doctor to let him know that now's the time and he should do it before he changes his mind, but he seems to get to this conclusion by himself. Maybe he saw their interaction play out, or maybe he took notice of the current lack of tension in the boy's body -- who knows, but he repositions his right hand holding the syringe and gets ready all the same. Ed looks at the needle again for a moment before deciding to follow the doctor's advice and settles his gaze somewhere else. He can't pick a single spot, switching between his legs, the wall to the right of him with obnoxious posters, Balrog himself and the light fixtures above him. Still, he can't stop himself for sparing a few quick glances towards the syringe, just in case.

When the injection actually happens, Ed is on the legs' part of the looking cycle, analyzing his sneakers with faked interest. It's possibly the best position he could've been in, since no one in the room is able to see him bite his lip extra hard to stifle the surprised noise when he feels the needle pierce his skin. The minute flinch hopefully also goes unnoticed, though that, he suspects, is less likely.

The needle feels uncomfortable in his arm, an unwanted intrusion, but the physical discomfort is nothing compared to the memories it unwillingly brings up. Yeah, Ed *definitely* didn't miss this. He will gladly forgo any syringe related procedures after this. He's never letting any of these annoying little things near his body again, if he can help it.

He only looks back towards his left arm area when he feels the needle exit his skin, it having done its job. He lets out a small sigh of relief at the sight. *It's over.* For what it's worth, this wasn't the worst experience he has had in his life: the doctor wasn't going in for round two or three and there's no immediate strange aftereffects, so that's gotta count for something.

The only remnants of a needle ever being present in him is a small bead of blood now forming at the puncture wound just below the bar code. It's nothing major, but it does stand out against Ed's pale skin. He goes to wipe it off himself, but the doctor is faster: he gently shoos the boy's hands away, muttering a '*let me-'* and covers it with a bandage he got from who-knows-where. It's a light blue colour with some darker squiggles printed on -- a bit childish, but not the worst choice, Ed decides. Matches his eyes, in a way.

He gets up from the examination table, right hand ghosting over the new accessory on his upper left arm as he turns towards the doctor. Ed doesn't know what's supposed to happen next -- shouldn't the guy say *'You're free to go'* or something? -- but he's had enough of this place for today and possibly the rest of his life, so he makes an awkward hand movement and starts slowly backing away.

"I'm just gonna, like, go now-"

"Oh! Wait a bit-" the doctor raises his left hand which, combined with his words, makes the boy stop in his tracks, though unwillingly. At the same time his right hand goes into one of the countertop's compartments and brings out a small container. "It's a usual procedure every child goes through at the end of their appointment, it'll be quick, " -he raises the container in Ed's direction- "You can pick any one you want. O-or don't, your choice."

Ed carefully approaches the extended box, not knowing what to expect. He looks inside only to find... lollipops.

A scattered pile of lollipops.

Well, this day is just getting better and better, ain't it?

He doesn't know how to respond to this, so he doesn't even try: he chooses the first one he sees on the top of the pile and takes it without thinking. He sticks it into his hoodie's pocket and huffs out a thanks. He might as well get *something* out of this.

Now *truly* finished, Ed wastes no time in moving past Balrog towards the door and exiting the office. The boxer turns to go as well, though not before giving the doctor a few bills for a job decently done. He doesn't catch how much, but it cannot have been a lot. Seems like Balrog was successful in knocking down the price using his own 'special methods'.

Ed waits for his mentor to overtake him just outside the door before following him through the corridor qathat had brought them to that office in the first place. Balrog sets a brisk pace -- he probably doesn't want to overstay here either now that their 'business' is dealt with. However, he does slow down when he angles his head to listen when the boy speaks up.

"Man, I thought doctors were supposed to be confident when addressing their patients, not nervously bumble around their own office. You sure you picked a professional?"

Balrog scoffs at that. "I'd worry about yourself first. Thought I'd need to hold your hand with how you were acting back there, all nervous and shit."

"Thank god you didn't." Ed shudders at the thought: he already feels embarrassed as is, don't need to add more fuel to the fire. "But at least I got this for my troubles," he says, punctuating his point by bringing out the lollipop out of his hoodie pocket and raising it in front of him.

The wrapper is a reddish colour with minimal illustrations -- *'cherry',* it says -- and is quickly discarded as the blond rips it off and puts the candy in his mouth. The artificial taste washes over his tongue and he hums in response. Tastes cheap, but what else can you expect from hospital-given candy.

Moving the lollipop from side to side, Ed continues on, "I hope you don't plan on me going here a second time, because when I tell you I will beat you up if you even *consider* it, I mean it." He's bluffing, they both know it -- he can't win against him during training, let alone a real fight. Not currently.

"Ha! Yeah right, in your dreams, brat," Balrog plays along anyway, smirking down at him.

They walk out of the hallway and into the reception area, the previously seen people already gone and replaced with new patients. Ed doesn't linger on them, though he still checks for any potential threats. Habits are hard to break, even if they are relatively new.

"But it's true! I won't back down this easily," he huffs out.

"We'll see how you feel about that in a few years when you'll need your booster shots done. After all of this trouble I went through I'm definitely not letting this go to waste."

Ed rolls his eyes at the statement, amusement unwillingly pulling at his lips. So, Balrog plans on keeping him for at least a few years. And is even willing to put in the effort to keep his health in check, misguided as it is. That's nice. He likes being with him so far, despite his skewed morals and whatever *this* whole thing was. Is. Better than the alternative, that's for sure.

They finally step out of the hospital and into the street. The fresh air feels nice after only breathing in the sterile atmosphere inside for what felt like hours. The sun has risen more since Ed last seen it, the sky no longer dark and instead full of late morning hues. There's more pedestrians as a result, too.

As they make their way back home or wherever else Balrog decides they need to go, Ed realizes there's one thing that he still needs to clear up.

"What was the vaccine for, anyway? What was the illness that you think I couldn't handle on my own, hmm?"

"Oh, I don't know."

What.

"You... don't *know*?"

"I told them to give me someone that can give vaccines and they just so happened to have a guy that does them to kids, so I went to him and he said he'd *'handle it',*" Balrog says, shrugging, "I didn't ask for any specifics."

Ed lightly touches the bandage on his arm. Guess that explains the childish design and the lollipops. The unknowingness of what exactly entered his body leaves a bad taste in his mouth, the kind that can't be removed by the cherry flavored candy, but it can't be anything bad. Balrog seems to trust the doctor, so there must be some sort of basis for that, right?

Not hearing an answer, Balrog looks at Ed and, noticing his expression, sighs. "Look, that guy was ready to grant my every wish after our little *meeting* yesterday, he would have to have been stupid to do anything to you. So just... stop. Doing that."

A quiet laugh combined with an exhale leaves the blond's mouth. Always such an eloquent speaker, that guy. But he's right, Ed's just being dumb. Overthinking stuff when it should be obvious. He blames it on the range of emotions he just went through in the span of an hour.

Shaking his head Ed puts both hands into his pockets and sends out a quick smile towards Balrog. The boxer just huffs and turns forward.

"We're grabbing something to eat and then we're going to continue your training. Your jabs are still weak."

Ed hums in agreement. "Sure thing."

He hopes he gets to hit Balrog at least once today. Just a little retribution for today's events.

End Notes

I suddenly got into sf6 in september (thanks sajam slam) and been obsessed with this emo looking boxer ever since. This all came from a stupid thought I had when I saw Ed disliked needles that went "getting his blood drawn and his shots done must be hell". Then it spiralled into this. I'm sorry.

If there are any glaring mistakes, I am legally allowed to use the "english is not my first language" card.

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